



THE PROFESSIONAL SECRET

A TALE OF THE DEATH CHAMBER

BY
ROLAND MOLINEUX



WE held a concert in the Death Chamber that evening; not a popular affair, but a genuinely exclusive function, since the public could not have procured admittance for love or money. Our diminutive friend, "Shorty," presided, and none of us disputed his right to do so. Shorty presided because he was the next to die.

Many a professional toastmaster might have learned from him the supreme art of this trying position. He understood perfectly that a presiding officer should not be much in evidence himself. Shorty wasted no time. Shorty didn't have much time to waste. With exquisite brevity he introduced each one of us, knowing that we were pledged by the sacred oath taken when initiated on the first night passed in the Dead House to do on this occasion whatever he requested.

"Hello, Benjamin!" came from Shorty's cage. "Give us a song, Benjamin." And then we knew that the most sacred of our many last rites and ceremonies, "The Concert of Farewell Appearance," had begun.

Black Benjamin performed in a very feeble voice his favorite ditty about "Old Massa," a "Yaller Gal" and "Slavery Days." Shorty applauded and we all followed suit, charmed with anything of which our chairman was pleased to approve. A story was then demanded from "Larry," which was told, but which is unfit to set down here for at least one reason.

Others were called upon in turn and each responded. Then, last of all, Shorty invited the Honorable Mayor of Death Chamber to sing. I knew I had to; it was the law of the land.

"What shall I sing?" I asked, much doubting my ability to render anything.

"Ave Maria," was Shorty's prompt response.

In the other days I had studied three of them—Schubert's, Gounod's and Luzzi's. I sang the last named, for it was in Shorty's mother tongue.

Imagine singing Luzzi's "Ave Maria" in the Death Chamber at midnight—singing it to a companion with whom you have lived for years and whom you have never seen! That is "altogether something," as Shorty himself would have expressed it, but when you know that that companion will never hear another song on earth, and when your accompaniment is the whirr of certain machinery in the next room you cannot express the feeling at all.

Somehow or other I commenced the matchless hymn. There must be magic in those notes, for as I went along the past came back again, memories that meant so much to me and which another had forgotten, and then time and place were gone and I forgot poor Shorty, for there is something the memory of which is stronger than the place in which my friend was to rest the morning after.

I finished. Perhaps I had sung abominably, for Shorty started no applause, and, of course, under those circumstances none of the others would have dared to intrude upon his silence.

But I heard Shorty mumbling in his cell. I saw one of the "Death Watch" peep into it and tiptoe away. The other, my keeper, Andrew, came to me, trembling with excitement.

"That's it!" he whispered, so as not to disturb Shorty's devotions. "That's it! When did you hear it?"

"What?" I asked, astonished.

"Adeso e nell'ora della nostra morte, 'Ave Maria.'" He hummed the air correctly. He knew the English meaning, too—"Mary, Be with Us in the Dark Hour of Death."

Back of Andrew's question was a story, and finally I got it from him. As set down here I have spared you his repetitions and the many questions I asked. I can mention no names, but here is the story as I remember it:

street a physician. The doctor was a man past middle life, a man of talent and refinement. Some asserted him to be a refugee from his native land. Nevertheless, throughout the Italian colony he was known and respected, and this apart from the fact that he was reputed rich. From his aristocratic looks and manners he could not have been other than a gentleman, possibly of noble birth. Perhaps through all the years there remained in his blood some remnant of that which ran undiluted in the old families of the Borgias or the De Medicis. If so, no one knew it, for he never spoke of himself.

Like those who are very wise, he said little and studied much. He was a scientist, a specialist in toxicology, and lectured on that department of chemistry in one of the medical colleges of his adopted city.

Into the doctor's life, as into every other, sorrow had found its way. Perhaps it was only one among many disappointments, but it was the one which was known. As is not unusual this sorrow was the result of kindness.

The doctor had adopted a boy, whom he had come to love as a son. Upon this boy he had lavished every advantage of education. In spite of this as years went by the doctor could not help seeing that his hopes for the boy's future were doomed to disappointment. Carlos grew up dissipated. Nothing could restrain him. The doctor redoubled his efforts. He was generous and forbearing. Over and over again he paid the young man's debts, started him anew; forgave, excused. But a day came when Carlos robbed the doctor and left his house. The doctor grieved for him; he was very lonely.

His friends shook their heads when the doctor brought her home—this unknown woman whom he had found in the hospital, treated with consummate skill, restored to health and married—shook their heads and gossiped and asked one another, "Who is she?" There was ample reason for their talk, for since when has not the beautiful and the new been sufficient evidence for slander?

Beautiful she was, with a voice of gold, round and low, alluring as a maiden's voice; yet there was a rare passion in it, too—but not for him.

Again the doctor forgave his protege, and the new wife seemed to influence Carlos for his good. He sang no more in the music halls,

in which he had found employment; instead, he came and sang with her in the doctor's home. And the doctor loved to listen to their duos. He did not know about those midday luncheons at Solari's or the forbidden pleasures of the afternoon.

And then the baby came.

In that same year, to the medical world a great discovery was announced. Every physician knows and uses it now, but forty years ago the new drug caused a sensation.

Late one afternoon the doctor sat in his office. Before him on his desk, in a small blue phial, was the new material, and on the morrow he proposed to consider its properties in his lecture. But the subject presented many difficulties. Not a volume on his well filled book shelves could help him, for the drug was as yet almost unstudied experimentally. It responded to no known tests; no characteristic reaction had been found; it had not been success-

fully analyzed. But this white powder was the greatest cardiac stimulant known to science. This he knew; he had demonstrated its action on animal life of lower types; it produced instant death. But the doctor wondered what a lethal dose would be to a human being. He thought; he calculated; he wanted very much to give his opinion on the subject; some day an accident

might verify his statement and that would be a scientific triumph.

He was aroused from his reverie by laughter in the little drawing room adjoining. His wife and baby were there, and Carlos. Carlos was playing with the baby. Carlos was always playing with the baby. The doctor listened with pleasure; his heart sang within him; he rose to join them. He would give up work

and relax his mind in the family circle. Company was expected for dinner, and the lecture could wait till afterward. The strains of a wheezy hand organ started up outside. There was something so pitiful in its cracked notes that the doctor went and looked from the window.

Outside the snow was trying to cover the streets with its kindly

fall, and the wind was vainly trying to blow it away and expose the filthy pavements. Amid the conflict stood old Pedro with his miserable instrument, bareheaded and expectant. When he saw his fellow-countryman a fit of coughing racked his cunning old frame. The doctor left the window and stepped into the street; Pedro knew what was coming—money and orders to go home. He received both with many groans and blessings. Meanwhile the wind had slammed the office door behind the doctor, so that on return he was obliged to use his key.

The laughter in the next room was different now; there was no more crooning over the baby; it was suppressed and earnest. The wind had tricked them. The wind which could not expose the dirt outside had bared the shame within.

The doctor listened at the door. He heard ingratitude and infidelity; there was the sound of kisses. All the race showed in the doctor then. In an instant he was a flame of fire.

In another moment he was bending over an open drawer of his desk, and the weapon it contained was almost in his hand. Then he stopped, for as he bent down to take the pistol, on the desk the little blue bottle grinned up into his face.

At that moment the doctor proved himself a great man, for he was greater than his race. Find a Russian who is not stubborn, a German with wit and enthusiasm, a phlegmatic and thorough Frenchman, and you have found great men. But find an Italian who can control his passion and you have found a very great man indeed.

With a hand that trembled a little, the doctor picked up the vial and kissed it, then he held up one hand toward the crucifix upon the wall as his lips moved silently. Back to the folding doors he crept and listened. And the words he heard I can tell you, and what they meant you will know; but what they meant to a husband no man may tell or know, unless he hears them for himself.

"Yes, and I will spend the night here," said Carlos.

"You can't, possibly."

"Oh, yes, I can."

"How?" she asked.

"After dinner I propose to be taken ill, so violently ill that the fool will insist on my remaining, thanks to the storm." Carlos kissed her again and again.

She struggled free. "Well, what of it?" she whispered defiantly.

Again Carlos caught her in his arms. "Your husband will go away this evening."

"How do you know?"

"I have arranged it. A night call to the other end of Brooklyn."

The doctor shut his eyes and teeth; he went white with pain; he grew very old during those few moments.

And then the guests arrived—the parish priest, his sister and another lady. The doctor entered to receive them. There was no sign of excitement in his greeting; surely the blood in him told that evening. They dined, chatted and laughed. The kindly spirit of the hospitable chianti warmed their hearts. The doctor drank nothing. His eyes opened, he saw the looks exchanged, the hands which flew to touch each other during the ordinary courtesies of the table. He saw the smiles, and yet he gave no sign. He only whispered to the servant who brought champagne, and after coffee he caused brandy to be served to the men and benedictine to the ladies.

Then the ladies went upstairs to see the little one asleep, and the men lit their cigars and sat before the open hearth. All of them were silent.

The priest looked into the fire. In it he saw celestial visions—the glowing coals formed golden streets and shining temples, the smoke became a cloud of incense bathing them. All was eternal glory, light! He looked, good man, and thought of heaven!

To Carlos the fire was hot and fascinating and consuming. It was love he saw there.

And the doctor? From out the fire little devils laughed and glared and beckoned; envy and hatred hissed and leaped and spit upon him, and he saw at the bottom of it all the

(Continued on Page Two, This Section.)

